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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [KMPI](#) [AMGT](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIA FIRST QUARTER REPORT ON FREEDOM AGENDA

REF: A. STATE47911
[B](#). 05 DAMASCUS 2534
[C](#). DAMASCUS 1216

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Embassy's implementation of its 2005 Democratic Reform Strategy in the first three months of 2006 has been constrained by a hardening SARG attitude towards reform and SARG efforts to restrict Embassy operations, both largely prompted by the strained political atmosphere evident in Syria in late 2005 and early 2006. Even under ideal conditions, achievement of most of the desired outcomes and benchmarks mentioned in the approved country strategy for Syria, relating to the lifting of emergency law, ending repression of dissidents, removing the licensing requirement for NGO's, as well as passing a political parties law, would have been difficult to achieve. Despite the constraining factors, Post did see progress in a few areas since the beginning of the year, including Syrian participation in four International Visitor programs related to rule of law or NGO management, and continuing interest in -- if not always successful completion of -- projects supported by MEPI funding. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Embassy Damascus' progress in achieving its freedom agenda objectives (Refs A and B) has been limited due to SARG intransigence over moving forward on any political reforms. Despite the signals it sent in the spring of 2005, in the run-up to the June Ba'ath Party Congress, about willingness to discuss passage of a political parties law, annulling Article 8 of the Constitution (mandating ruling party status for the Ba'ath Party), granting citizenship to an initial tranche of stateless Kurds, rescinding the Emergency law, and passing new NGO and media laws, the SARG has taken no action on any of these issues. Consequently the baselines mentioned in Ref B remain an accurate set of descriptors for the situation and point to the scope of the challenges that remain ahead for democratic development in Syria. Encouraging rule of law and good governance, ending repression of dissidents, helping political opposition and civil society to develop, and identifying future democratic leaders remain the principal objectives of the Embassy's Democratic Reform Strategy for Syria.

[1](#)3. (C) The political environment for achieving these objectives became more complicated in the fall and winter as then-UNIIIC chief Detlev Mehlis issued two reports on the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik al-Hariri, casting international scrutiny and suspicion on Syria. The U.S. policy of isolating the regime and sanctioning certain regime figures contributed to SARG uncertainty. The regime responded by cracking down even harder on the weak political opposition and civil society, detaining and interrogating significant numbers of activists, subjecting some of them to the prospect of drawn-out trials on trumped-up charges. In an atmosphere of paranoia and defensiveness, the regime shelved most discussion of political reform and froze any

forward movement.

¶4. (C) Since the beginning of the year, the SARG has taken steps to restrict a range of Embassy activities (ref C), slow-rolling the issuance of visas for official Americans, restricting the Charge's MFA access to the level of Chief of Protocol, and, in the area of Public Diplomacy, putting on hold a high school exchange program, refusing to nominate candidates for participation in teacher training and professional development programs, and insisting that only SARG-nominated candidates be eligible for Syrian Fulbright grants. Late last year, the SARG used its security services and their proxies to intimidate one MEPI "Democracy Small Grants" recipient into returning his funding and prevented the completion of a second project. In addition, the SARG has made it almost impossible for PD officers to consult directly with Ministries of Education and Higher Education on programming needs, causing intolerable delays in getting programming implemented. The SARG has begun trying to make clear via these restrictions and others that the USG will not be able to circumvent the SARG to fund civil society and NGO's directly.

¶5. (C) Despite these constraining factors, Post did see progress in a few areas since the beginning of the year. The Dean and three professors at the University of Damascus Law School attended a single country IV program on human rights. In addition, the Dean of the Aleppo University Law School attended a regional IV program on the rule of law, a Syrian activist attended a regional IV program on human rights advocacy and awareness, and the acting director of a prominent NGO attended a regional IV program on NGO management. Also, two alumni of the MEPI Study of the U.S. Institutes for Student Leaders attended the alumni conference in Abu Dhabi in February. In addition, MEPI funds have been used for projects that are under consideration or underway, including a program promoting environmental awareness for

¶6. (C) However, given the inhibiting factors mentioned above, Post was unable to implement some of the more ambitious programmatic initiatives mentioned in its 2005 Democratic Reform Strategy. For example, we were not able to create a forum for people-to-people discussion of the Emergency Law and the need for respect for human rights across different legal systems or to hold a PD-sponsored journalism conference on the relationship between the media and the government.

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